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ABSTRACT

How are political messages shaped by media pundits and candidate operatives? This unit of instruction, which deals with this topic, is a part of MCOM 1003/Introduction to Mass Communication. The 1992 presidential debates (between President George Bush and Governor Bill Clinton, with the addition of Ross Perot) can serve as an excellent forum to teach students about message manipulation, and they will be seen on videotape as short-form documentaries. Participation is solicited in class discussion by asking students how their performances as media pundits or candidate "spin doctors" might vary from those individuals seen in the videotape of the debates. The program features analysis of format styles, individual performance and media coverage of the three presidential debates. The first and third debates followed a traditional news conference format, with questions asked by four reporters. The second debate, which took place before a group of undecided voters, allowed for more interaction between candidates and audience. Skills of the candidates will be analyzed in each debate, as well as on a cumulative basis, to determine the overall winner. Short video clips illustrating relevant messages from the above areas will be employed and discussed by each panelist. A script consisting of eight voiceovers from the program "Instant Analyses of the 1992 Presidential Debates by Reporters and Pundits: Substantive or Shallow?" is included. The goal is for it to be instructive for student journalists at Southern Arkansas University to evaluate differences in broadcast and print political reportage. (NKA)

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"Instant Analyses of the 1992 Presidential Debates by
Reporters and Pundits: Substantive or Shallow?"
(Mass Communication Instructional Unit)

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It is essential that future student journalists begin early in their college careers to critically evaluate messages in mass communication. To that end, I have devised many teaching methods using television in the classroom at Southern Arkansas University. As a specialist in broadcast journalism, I have the opportunity to edit videotapes on relevant current issues and show them to students as short-form documentaries. The example below is a unit of instruction in MCOM 1003/Introduction to Mass Communication. How are political messages shaped by media pundits and candidate operatives? The 1992 presidential debates served as an excellent forum to teach students about message manipulation. Participation is solicited in class discussion by asking students how their performances as media pundits or candidate "spin doctors" might vary from those individuals seen in the videotape.

Before discussing the script for my individual program, which is listed on the title page, I will make some broad comments as chair of the panel "Evaluating the 1992 Presidential Debates: Formats, Performances and Media Coverage." They indeed were unique in many respects. The inclusion of billionaire businessman Ross Perot into the mix forced George Bush to do more than solely attack Bill Clinton. Representatives of the Arkansas governor insisted on a talk show-style debate, where Clinton's

extemporaneous speaking skills and stage movements could shine. Perot's down-home debating style, replete with folksy aphorisms, gave him the appearance of being a natural, not staged, candidate. Intense post-debate scrutiny by television pundits focused on evaluations of performers and how "spin doctors" viewed the proceedings. As a result, what is learned overall from a political communication perspective?

This program will feature analyses of format styles, individual performances and media coverage of the three presidential debates. The first and third debates followed a traditional news conference format, with questions asked by four reporters, though a single moderator was employed in the first half of the third debate. The second debate, which took place before a group of undecided voters, allowed for more interaction between candidates and the audience. Which format elicited the most relevant information for voters to evaluate? Each candidate also had specific goals entering the debates. What were they? Skills of the three will be analyzed in each debate, as well as on a cumulative basis, to determine the overall winner. A critique of post-debate network and cable television news analysis will examine how reporters and pundits differentiated substantive debate responses from those that were stylistic but less informative or precise.

Short video clips illustrating relevant messages from the

above areas will be employed and discussed by each panelist. Audience participation will center on examination of future debates and how the media might cover them. A script consisting of voiceovers from the program "Instant Analyses of the 1992 Presidential Debates by Reporters and Pundits: Substantive or Shallow?" follows. It has been modified from the traditional half-page audio and video television scripting format for easier readability.

(VOICEOVER ONE)

The 1992 presidential debates are now, for most Americans, distant video images that briefly flickered on their television screens. Before and after each of the three debates, however, viewers could find numerous pundits and partisan "spin doctors" dissecting them in minute detail. Does this rush to judgment adversely affect the political process? Are these various efforts at political pontification even on the mark? You may recall how conservative columnist George Will gushed about the performance of challenger Ronald Reagan against incumbent President Jimmy Carter in the only presidential debate of 1980. Indeed, it was viewed by most as a Reagan victory. What viewers may not have known was that Will had coached Reagan before the Cleveland debate. Can voters cut through this endless analysis and make serious decisions on candidates? Yes, but it is not

always an easy process. This program will evaluate various instant analyses of the 1992 presidential debates, examining the process by which political reporters and pundits judge debate performances.

(VOICEOVER TWO)

Ross Perot was viewed as the clear winner of the first presidential debate by most political pundits. His down-home style and appearance of straight talk was judged to be a hit. Perot often made hard-hitting statements without being specific on solutions. First, you will see sound bites of Perot from the St. Louis debate, followed by a representative sampling of media responses.

(VOICEOVER THREE)

Governor Bill Clinton was said to be too programmed, and President George Bush too passive, in their respective initial debate performances. These comments, as viewed in the long run, appear to have been generally accurate. Clinton and Bush are shown here in clips that back up assertions voiced by many political reporters and editorial writers.

(VOICEOVER FOUR)

The second debate, featuring a talk show-style format with an

audience of uncommitted voters, was negotiated by the Clinton campaign. He was skilled in this process, as he had used the town meeting format on many occasions during the Democratic primaries. In presidential debates, it is more how you appear, than what you say, that lingers in the minds of voters. Just ask Richard Nixon about his overall appearance in his initial 1960 debate with John F. Kennedy. Watch the confidence by which Clinton conducts himself in the following clips during the Richmond, Virginia debate, then see how pundits viewed his performance.

(VOICEOVER FIVE)

In addition to the political pundits, we have campaign "spin doctors" that try to get out positive debate messages, no matter how their candidates performed. Here are a few examples following the Richmond debate.

(VOICEOVER SIX)

Bush and Perot were generally not seen as effective as Clinton in the talk show debate. Perot was chastised for saying the same things he had in the first debate. Bush was supposedly passive and occasionally looked at his watch. Again, the pundits concentrate more on what is seen instead of what is said.

(VOICEOVER SEVEN)

Presidential debates are often covered by reporters and pundits as sporting events, with terms such as "knockout" used with nauseating regularity. The third debate in East Lansing, Michigan proved to be a very entertaining event. There was more real debate clash here than in the other debates. By most accounts, President Bush acquitted himself admirably in this half-single moderator, half-journalist questioning session. Despite his performance, however, some immediately felt the election was over. In this scenario, Bill Clinton would win no matter what Bush did.

(VOICEOVER EIGHT)

Viewers obviously cannot control the process by which political pundits make post-presidential debate judgments. What they can do, however, is more closely scrutinize the atmosphere in which these opinions are made. The 1992 election was closer than any pollster had anticipated. A wellspring of resentment against Bush and Clinton led to Perot receiving the most votes for an independent candidate since Theodore Roosevelt led the Bull Moose ticket in 1912. In the instances shown, the rush to immediate judgment often takes precedence over thoughtful analysis. This will likely not change in the future, but intensify.

Part of my instructional unit in this area also involves constructive criticism of previous campaigns. For example, how does broadcast coverage of the 1992 Bush/Clinton/Perot debates differ from print coverage of the 1984 Reagan/Mondale debates? Are there differences in expectations, reportage or punditry? In December 1984, I authored a graduate paper in COS 484/Mass Media and Political Communication at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas comparing and contrasting print coverage in the two Reagan/Mondale debates.

It is instructive for student journalists at Southern Arkansas University to evaluate differences in broadcast and print political reportage. Used as a classroom handout, the UNLV graduate paper (complete with instructor comments) demonstrates to current MCOM 1003/Introduction to Mass Communication students how coverage of recent presidential campaigns and debates vary depending upon which medium is analyzed.



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